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Hope for Arms Control

President Reagan is convinced that the Soviet Union will want to negotiate on arms control no matter how tough his administration's anti-Soviet words and actions become. And he has high hopes of achieving an arms control treaty before he leaves office.

Reagan's critics are afraid he is deluding himself about Soviet intentions and may have missed the chance for a solid arms treaty.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev continued the Soviets' 8-month-old moratorium on nuclear tests, even though the United States has conducted eight such tests during the Soviets' unilateral moratorium. The administration says that the tests are necessary to make sure the U.S. nuclear stockpile is reliable.

The president remains deeply suspicious of any olive branch Gorbachev holds out to him. When we asked Reagan recently if he thought he could "come home with an arms control treaty of some kind before your presidency is over," the president replied:

"Let me say I'm hopeful that we can. And this does not mean the thing that we've done too much of in the past—believing that if, oh, we only held out our hand and smiled and were genteel that they would have a change of heart. They're not going to have a change of heart at all."

We've seen several classified White House reports to Congress that give the facts behind the president's wary view of Soviet intentions. The background against which Gorbachev made his testing moratorium was the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, which limited U.S. and Soviet nuclear tests to a 150-kiloton level. It was never ratified by the United States, but both sides agreed to abide by it. (The United States has not violated the treaty.)

The latest of the president's reports, classified secret, charges that of approximately 190 underground nuclear explosions set off by the Soviets between March 31, 1976, and last Nov. 30, about 21 "had central value seismic yield estimates above 150 kilotons, the largest with a central value of 315 kilotons and nine others with central values of 200 kilotons or higher."

In response to these violations of the treaty, a secret Reagan report disclosed that the United States had made 18 "demarches," formal communications that would be tantamount to protests over the Soviet tests that were suspected of exceeding 150 kilotons.

Interestingly, there is a strong indication that Gorbachev has stopped the threshold violations in his effort to secure an arms control treaty. The presidential report notes that of the nine Soviet nuclear tests conducted since late 1984, only one had a central value of more than 150 kilotons.

It was probably the secret indications of a serious Soviet desire for an arms treaty that led the president to explain to us his chosen alternative to wide-eyed treaty hopes that could spell appeasement.

"What we have to do is deal in hard fact realities," he said. "And right now the thing that gives me reason for some optimism is that it would be very much to their advantage now [to have a treaty]."

Reagan said he believed there are two main reasons for Soviet willingness to negotiate now. One was the military buildup during his administration.

"The thing that I have difficulty making the Congress understand is that the Soviet Union in recent years had a one-way street," he said. "It was all epitomized in the cartoon of—when we started rearming—of two Russian generals, one saying to the other, 'I liked the arms race better when we were the only ones in it.' Now, what we have done is let them know they're not the only ones in it."

The second reason is the Soviet Union's domestic situation. "They're an economic basket case," Reagan told us. "And this is why he [Gorbachev] is going further in talking about arms control and disarmament . . ."

"And I think what we have to let them know is that the choice is very simple: either we arrive at some mutually beneficial arms reductions or we continue an arms race, because we're not going to let them continue having this great superiority over us. And faced with that, I have to believe that just deciding by the basis of their own welfare, that they could be talked into some arms reduction."

Footnote: The CIA recently changed its method of measuring Soviet nuclear tests, reducing size estimates by 20 percent. The Pentagon doesn't agree with this change. But even under the new CIA procedure, several of the past Soviet tests would still have exceeded the treaty threshold.

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